

COMMENTARY

# Graduate standardized tests receive low marks

(U-WIRE) LOS ANGELES —

Remember the days in high school after you decided where you wanted to go to college? You were free from stupid standardized tests like the SAT and you thought that you would never again have to face the laborious process of college applications.

But many of you were wrong. A few years later, you will have to go through the same impersonal process for graduate school. This time the standardized tests go by different names — LSAT, MCAT and GRE — but their inability to accurately measure you as a student remains the same.

Although the SAT has been scrutinized recently, the graduate school exams have had an aura of sanctity around them. Nobody wants to criticize the LSAT, MCAT, and the GRE — until now. These exams can be summed up using my own acronym: RCRAP.

I'm not opposed to all standardized testing. But the tests do not measure what they are supposed to measure; they are given too much weight by graduate schools, and the test-taking and application processes can be amended in a way that will benefit the students and graduate schools.

The graduate school exams are not taken under uniform circumstances. Some students study 500 hours and spend \$1,000 studying for the exams, but many other students cannot afford to do that.

According to some test-prep literature, the MCAT is supposed to measure "the high-order thinking skills necessary for success in medical school, including analytical reasoning, abstract thinking and

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David Burke

problem-solving."

How can the MCAT measure any of those factors if the only piece of information that medical schools receive is a person's score? What does a 35 mean? That's a good score, but what if the student who earned a 35 spent his entire summer studying for the exam and another student who did not study at all got a 32?

An MCAT score is completely inadequate for measuring "abstract thinking" abilities. Instead, it actually measures ability to study and memorize pre-ordered methods of thinking.

There is a large body of evidence that indicates student scores on the MCAT or the LSAT can improve with studying. On the LSAT, I know someone whose score fluctuated within a 23-point range! That's the difference between Harvard and Huckleberry State.

Inherent abilities are overshadowed by the amount of time put into exam preparation. Although study skills are important, these tests overemphasize that factor, focusing on a student's ability and willingness to study for them. One of the primary criteria for admission should not be a score on a piece of paper that is not indicative of the student's ability for preparation.

Luckily, there are many ways to improve the exams and the application process. The exams should all use uniform standards for preparation. New exams could be continuously created but not re-

leased to test-prep groups or to the public so students cannot study for them. Or, if the graduate schools would like students to study first, they can create test-prep courses that everyone must complete before taking the exam. This would level the playing field.

The admissions process should shift away from standardized tests in order to give admissions officers a better picture of the actual person that they are considering for admittance.

Most law schools do not require interviews, but they should. The

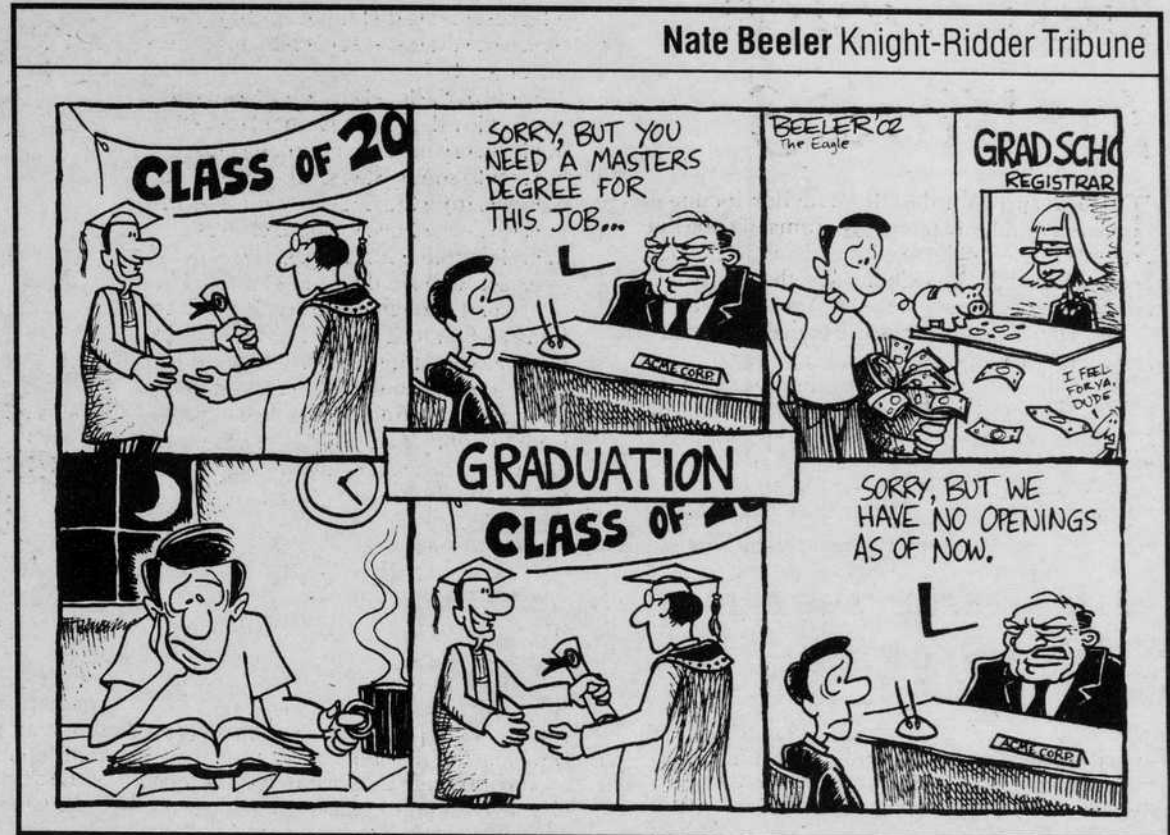
best way to know a student is to actually meet them.

Graduate schools should focus more on discovering what their applicants' lives are like with more personal essay questions. Do schools want a 4.0 student who soils himself when thrust into a social situation but is the world's best Counterstrike player, or a 3.6 student who writes for his college newspaper, plays intramural sports and actively participates in a few campus organizations?

A change in the graduate school

exams and a shift toward actually understanding the daily lives of students will ensure that more deserving students get into the schools to which they apply. I know that it is not easy or cheap to change test and admissions processes, but it is the right thing to do, and everyone will benefit.

This column is courtesy of David Burke of the Daily Bruin, the newspaper of the University of California in Los Angeles. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Bruin or the Emerald.



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